

State Parks and Forests

Background

New Jersey has over 635,000 acres of public open space under the stewardship of State government. Of these, more than 375,000 acres are included in the State parks and forests system, representing approximately 8 percent of New Jersey's total land area (national average is about 1%). The system is comprised of 39 parks, 11 forests, 3 recreational areas, and 43 natural areas. New Jersey is ranked eighth in the nation and second in the northeast region for state park system acreage.

In addition to its state parks and forests, New Jersey has trees along streets, highways, and rights-of-way, in small forested areas, and in municipal parks and playgrounds. These smaller areas with trees constitute New Jersey's "urban and community forests" which are discussed in another chapter.



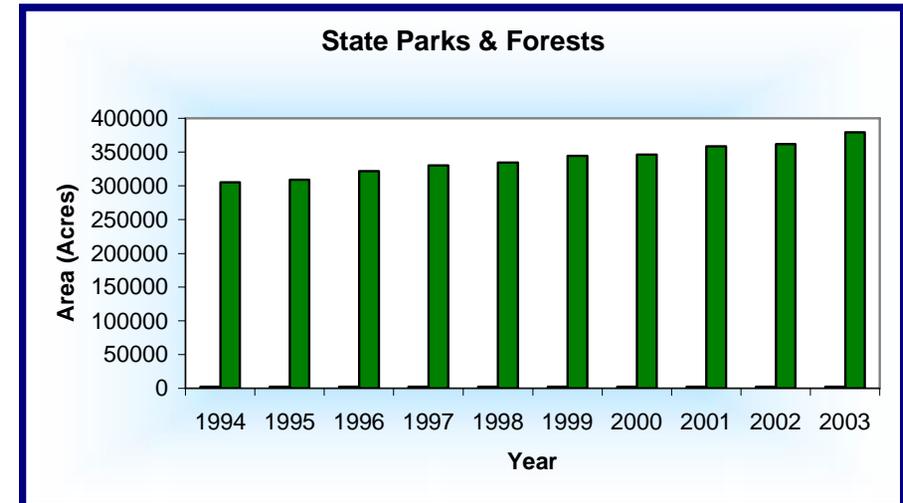
State parks and forests are available for a wide range of recreational opportunities, which include camping, swimming, hiking, boating, fishing and hunting, as well as other outdoor pursuits. These recreational uses generate economic benefits that contribute to New Jersey's multi-billion dollar tourism revenues.

In addition, parks and forests benefit the State through ecosystem services – vital natural functions that could be costly to replicate artificially. Of critical importance is the watershed protection value of the parks and forests, many of which are located in the watersheds of

some of the State's biggest water supply reservoirs and serve as "sponges and filters" for the water entering the reservoirs. These areas also serve as habitat for wildlife and help to promote the conservation of New Jersey's biological diversity. State park and forest lands contribute almost half of the area for watchable wildlife in the state. Healthy ecosystems within these State lands also play a vital role in mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and maintaining essential geo-chemical processes such as soil erosion control and groundwater protection.

Status and Trends

Over the period from 1994 to 2003, there was a slight increase in the acreage of State parks and forests from 305,291 acres to approximately 379,174 acres (see chart below¹). In that period, the annual percentage increase in park acreage ranged from one to five percent. An average of 14 million people per year visited the state park system². This translates to an average use density (visitation per unit area) of 42 visitations per acre over the 10-year period. The 2002 average use density for all states in the U.S. was about 46 visitations per acre.



Outlook and Implications

In addition to environmental benefits, the State parks and forests, in their current protected state, are responsible for substantial economic benefits to the State. A recent DEP study¹ estimated that the economic value is at least \$1.2 billion annually, which includes the value of important ecosystem services. This "green infrastructure" also creates a buffer zone to regulate the spread of development, functioning as a protected area around which sustainable land-use could be implemented. These state lands form the backbone of a proposed physical framework called Garden State Greenways (now under formulation), which will be a statewide system of interconnected open space and a green infrastructure of forests, wetlands, farms, waterways and recreation lands.

However, the State is well below the national average in terms of use density (42 visitations per acre in New Jersey compared to 46 nationally) and number of operating park units (50 New Jersey state parks and forests compared to 80 on average nationally) based on data compiled by the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD)² for the year 2002. DEP has yet to consider the implications of this for the carrying capacity of the current park system.

For the period 1994-2003, operating expenditures for New Jersey's park system averaged about \$31 million annually. The system's share of the 2002 State budget was 0.16 percent compared to a national average of 0.24 percent. In terms of capital expenditures for that year, New Jersey spent \$10.7 million compared to the national average for all states of \$15.6 million. The State is currently examining how to address needed capital improvements in order to maintain this vital natural asset in healthy and productive condition. It is also focusing on expanding the state park system through the creation of new state parks along with establishment or upgrading local parks across New Jersey. In October 2004, the State designated three new state parks at historic destinations in Paterson, Trenton and River Edge. A national competition will be held for the design of the Trenton and Paterson sites with emphasis on the historic features and ecological aesthetics.

More Information

Further information can be obtained from DEP's State Park Service, which administers the State parks and forests, at <http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests>

References

- ¹ New Jersey Division of Parks and Forestry. FY03 State of the Division Report (March 2003).
- ² New Jersey State Park Service. Attendance Report Fiscal Year 2002 (July 1, 2001 – June 30, 2002)
- ³ NJDEP Division of Science, Research and Technology. The Economic Value of New Jersey State Parks and Forests (June 2004).
- ⁴ National Association of State Park Directors. The 2003 Annual Information Exchange.